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ABSTRACT

Educators today may find a historical review of the Howard Players at Howard University (Washington, D.C.) in the 1920s important because of its implicit commentary on what constitutes community. While the Howard Players are generally written about in terms of the development of an African-American theater, historians ought also to think of their work as being linked to a national movement, that is community drama, as theorized and enacted by such figures as Percy Mackaye and W. E. B. DuBois. Two important figures in the developments at Howard, Montgomery Gregory and Alain Locke, worked for a theatrical enterprise that was intended to establish "a common ground where the architect, the painter, the musician, the dancer, the actor and the social worker shall construct plays that shall be things of beauty." Howard's theater curriculum was among the first credit-bearing drama programs offered by an American university, and it tried to cast itself as conciliatory among the differing viewpoints on the meaning of nation and culture. One consequence of theatrical workshops and programs at Howard was the introduction into theater of a generation of African-American women writers. And drama courses did not meet with the same resistance as courses in African history did. Broadly speaking, the Howard Players project was radical because it tried to reconfigure assumptions of a national culture and community which through history had included the African-American only as a shadow self. (Contains 21 references.) (TB)

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Composing a "National Negro Theater": Playwriting Courses at Howard University in the 1920s

The date is April 7, 1923, and the first performance by the Howard University Players of Thelma Myrtle Duncan's one-act play, The Death Dance, subtitled "An African Play." The Death Dance is a tribal "folk drama" about purging corrupted power. Driven by the impending execution of her lover, an intoxicating woman instigates the political demise of her lover's judge, a corrupt medicine man. The chorus or community dances a death dance initially around the hero-lover, finally around the medicine man. Although at first the community's will seems to be controlled by the powerful medicine man, the community itself becomes the play's most imperious force, turning as one against whomever is currently bound and gagged. Whether it was intended or not, a critique of community lies under the surface of Duncan's play.

Duncan had written her small drama as a student in Howard English professor Montgomery Gregory's classes in "Dramatic Technique." When The Death Dance was produced, Howard University had had a drama curriculum for a little over two years. In 1920, Gregory along with his colleague from the philosophy department, Alain Locke, formed the Department of Dramatic Art and Public Speaking and a theater group, the Howard Players, around courses in rhetoric and in dramatic structure and form. According to the 1920 Howard University catalogue, for the first level course in

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"Dramatic Art, attention was to be "directed to Negro folk-lore and history as materials for dramatic composition." During the second level, students were to be given "practical training in the production of dramas and pageants," with emphasis "placed upon community drama."

While the Howard Players are generally written about in terms of the development of an African-American theater, we ought as well to think of their work as being linked to a national movement, that is community drama, as theorized and enacted in the 19-teens by such figures as Percy Mackaye and W.E.B. Du Bois. Although community drama is generally associated with its little, local theaters, one phenomenon of community drama, the pageant, was mounted in some cases by hundreds of performers, members of various urban ethnic communities. Du Bois's celebrated allegorical pageant of black history, "The Star of Ethiopia, was produced before 6,000 spectators in a Washington, D.C. stadium in 1915, one year before Mackaye's "Caliban: by the Yellow Sands," an allegory which celebrated the historical dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture, was mounted before 15,000 spectators in the City College of New York stadium with a cast allegedly representing the full range of the city's ethnic and racial diversity.

Ever its ardent priest, Mackaye characterized community drama as a "ritual of democratic religion," to be observed in "temples of the communal imagination" (11,13). Within the haze of such mystifying language, Mackaye's liturgies of democratic

religion were only able to articulate what a social historian has recently called the "complex and mixed experience" of American culture and community (Richard Sennett) by processing that experience through an Anglo-Saxon iconology. Therefore, in retrospect, what makes the community drama movement interesting are the contrasting allegories of culture that from its beginnings were already de-stabilizing one foundational ideal upon which the theatrical temples of Mackaye's democratic religion seemed to be built: the ideal, that is, of an integrated, singular national culture.

In 1921, after Howard's new Department of Dramatic Art and Public Speaking was absorbed by the English Department, a third level course was set up so that student compositions from the second level course could be "revised and plays of a more advanced type" written. Moreover, the Howard Players would now act as an "experimental laboratory of Negro drama" by staging trial performances of "the meritorious dramas in the Dramatic Workshop preliminary to the public presentation. These courses," the catalogue stated, are intended "to develop the dramatic literature for a Negro Theater" (Catalogues 1920-22; Plays of Negro Life 416). Gregory himself taught the playwriting courses; Marie Moore-Forrest, previously known for her work within the community drama movement, served as advisor in dramatic art.

Based upon Harvard professor George Pierce Baker's celebrated "47 Workshop," Howard's new curriculum has the

distinction of being one of the first credit-bearing drama programs offered by an American university. The program emerged when it did because during the late teens, and often in the face of strong resistance by Howard's trustees and administration, a group of African-American professors from across the disciplines had begun working toward making the school into a center for a distinctly African-American academic inquiry and discourse, one which could be woven into traditional western cultural study.

Like his colleagues in history, sociology, philosophy, and English, Gregory believed that academic remedies were needed to address the "unfortunate" history and social status of African America. Indeed, faculties at HBCUs believed they had a mission to lead the way toward defeating the "evil of the racial situation in this country" specifically through speaking and writing, musical and stage performance. "Our only salvation," Gregory wrote in setting out his vision of a Howard drama program, "lies in self-expression." And because the "negro has been denied access to the aesthetic and artistic life of America," he said, "we must evolve a drama of our own" ("Vision" 440,41).

Gregory's and Locke's project at once both reinforced and contested the rhetoric of the community drama movement. Their theatrical enterprise was intended, first, to establish "a common ground where the architect, the painter, the musician, the dancer, the actor, and the social worker shall construct plays

that shall be things of beauty." Indeed, drama at Howard was to carry out its kind of cultural work by democratizing the theater, that is by making it "the property of all the people." Through the community drama movement, Gregory said, "where all the artistic and social agencies of the community co-operate in the production of plays or pageants for the people," drama realizes its potential as an "agency for the moral, social, and spiritual well being of the nation" ("Vision" 440). The significance of the Howard Players was, Locke would insist, "if anything, more national than racial" ("Introduction," Plays of Negro Life).

But in spite of its nationalistic aims, because the vision of drama at Howard University was articulated through a rhetoric of racial particularly, it also contested typical pluralistic ideals of community drama. Echoing writings by Locke and Gregory, Kelly Miller, a Howard dean and professor of sociology, noted in a 1925 article on Howard that the negro college existed because history had violently set African-Americans apart; it would continue to function, in part, as a site for African-Americans to comprehend the meaning of their particular cultural identity and circumstances (312).

Community pageants such as Percy Mackaye's reflected prevailing feelings in a nation rife with nativist sentiments and suspect of any kind of separate racial or ethnic consciousness. On the other hand, within African-American communities, movements for racial consciousness and nationalism were posing serious

challenges for academic moderates concerned about demonstrating that segregated colleges were academic equals to white institutions. The Howard drama program tried to cast itself as conciliatory among these differing viewpoints on the meaning of nation and culture.

For Locke and Gregory believed that real pluralism depended upon a new way of thinking about culture, community, and nation. The radicalism of their project is to be recovered from implications within their promotional writings, that nation and culture for the United States included the richness of African American experience. Their rhetoric presented the Howard Players as an advance guard for transforming perceptions of racial particularity into nationalism.

During an interview Gregory gave in 1921 to Kenneth McGowan, theater critic for the New York Globe, he explained that ultimately the national negro theater would not establish its theaters in African-American districts, "for that would tend to prevent the white community from seeing their art" (qtd. in Perkins 6). Drama was a "wonderful opportunity," Gregory told McGowan, for the negro to "win a better understanding in the community" (6)--the community, Gregory appears to acknowledge here, means the white community.

Nevertheless, their national Negro theater's major objective was to reconfigure the community, first of all by revising the language and symbols constituting its ideologies of race.

Despite the decline of white minstrelsy at the close of the 19th century, many African-Americans of the early twentieth century remained much concerned that minstrelsy and its signs had come to shape the white world's sense of African America. "Minstrel nonsense," Houston Baker has said, "marred" the lives of African-Americans "during thirty uneasy years from emancipation to the dawn of a new century" (Modernism 36). Even in 1925, Gregory lamented, "the average play of Negro life...whether employing white or black actors, reeks with this pernicious influence" ("Drama" 155).

In the introduction to his celebrated 1925 anthology, The New Negro, which heralded a Harlem cultural renaissance, Alain Locke wrote that because the old negro's "shadow self has been more real to him than his personality," he continued to require a "reorientation of view" (4). In the same collection, Montgomery Gregory wrote that "the only avenue of genuine achievement in American drama for the Negro lies in the development of the rich veins of folk-tradition of the past and in the portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro masses of to-day" (159). Titles of some plays developed in Howard workshops and put on in the early twenties by the Howard Players may suggest the imagery and symbolism surrounding Gregory's and Locke's reorientation: The Yellow Tree by DeReath Irene Byrd Busey; The Desert Sun by Lucille Banks; Jinda by Thelma Duncan. Other plays produced by the Howard Players in the early twenties included Willis

Richardson's Mortgaged; Ridgeley Torrence's Simon the Cyrenian, Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones, and Jean Toomer's haunting folkplay Balo.

But as Nellie McKay points out in a study of African-American theater and drama in the 1920s, while all the major theorists of an "authentic" African-American theater in this era wanted to correct the "disastrous" consequences of minstrelsy, not everyone agreed on what an authentic African-American drama comprised. For Du Bois, who continued to organize his own community theater enterprises throughout the twenties, any real folk-play movement for African-Americans had to comprise plays "About us...By us...For us...Near us" ("Krigwa Players" 134). Although all the Howard Players' student productions were about African-American or African subjects, many of the plays were written by white playwrights, including O'Neill, Torrence, and even Percy Mackaye. In a 1922 letter, Mackaye, now Fellow in Poetry and Drama at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, told Gregory that the path being blazed "in dramatic art at Howard University is one way, at least, which seems to me very hopefully to lead to the spiritual vision and social cooperation so greatly to be desired among our educated citizens, whether negroes or whites" (M. Gregory letters).

When Gregory wrote letters and articles to raise funds in this period, he often quoted a letter Eugene O'Neill had written to him in January of 1921, expressing "sympathy with your

undertaking" and a strong belief that "the gifts the Negro can and will bring to our native drama are invaluable ones" (M. Gregory letters). Judging by the letters to and from Gregory Howard University keeps in its archives, few of the Howard Players's early prominent supporters were African-American. Apart from Gregory and Locke, the only other African-American to serve on the advisory board was James Weldon Johnson, joined there by, among others, O'Neill, Torrence, McGowan, Robert Benchley, and Samuel Eliot, the president of Smith College.

According to Nellie McKay, Locke's and Gregory's tireless promotion, in the early twenties, of a negro theater in the folk tradition entered into other ongoing "disagreements surrounding a definition of black theater, its cultural role and function" (McKay 617). Both men believed that the "most promising path" in the "quest of modern American realism" was the folk play, rather than the currently dominant "problem play" ("Introduction" Plays of Negro Life), with its tendency toward "moralistic allegories of melodramatic protests as dramatic correctives and antidotes for race prejudice" (qtd. by McKay 621).

Gregory had had the idea for the Howard Players, in fact, in reaction to the NAACP sponsored production of Angelina Grimke's propagandist "race play" Rachel. The Howard Players were founded, Gregory wrote late in the 20s, to promote "the purely artistic approach and folk-drama idea" (Plays of Negro Life 414). But this rhetoric of pure artistry, coming after the fact, was a

kind of historical revisionism intended to rename the deep political significance of the project.

Late in the 20s, two major anthologies of drama took stock of how the decade had defined an authentic negro theater. As they had done in organizing the Howard Players, Locke's and Gregory's Plays of Negro Life: A Source Book of Native American Drama combined works about African or African-American subjects by both white and African-Americans authors. Many of those included in the sourcebook had been staged by the Howard Players, suggesting once again the representative importance they ascribed to their efforts.

One consequence of theatrical workshops and programs at Howard was the introduction into theater of a generation of African-American women writers. This is made evident in the other anthology of this period, Willis Richardson's 1930 anthology of plays by African-American authors, Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro, co-edited by Carter G. Woodson. In addition to several of his own plays, Richardson includes works by Thelma Duncan and May Miller, another student of Gregory and the daughter of Howard dean Kelly Miller. Other female writers of the era who had studied under Gregory include Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Shirley Graham, Lucy White, and Eulalie Spence (Perkins 7).

Both the anthologies show that a preponderance of plays by African-Americans in the 20s were written by women. If this

paper appears to subordinate the women in this history, my excuse is, in part, my own need for continued research. For example, research might be able to demonstrate that the varied and extensive cultural and political work of African-American women during the late 19th century within churches, literary groups, and political organizations was an important precursor to the development of a 1920s African-American theater. The Howard Players can and should be considered from an altogether different position than the one I've chosen: that is, the history of African-American women's writing as "an active influence within history" for the shaping of social conditions (Carby 95).

* * *

The Howard Players and courses in dramatic art continued through the late twenties under Locke's direction and in the thirties under the direction of poet and critic, Sterling Brown; from the forties into the sixties, the Players were directed by Owen Dodson. But the heady dream of a national negro theater seems to have gone up in a flame of university politics for Locke and Gregory sometime in the mid-twenties.

In 1926, the Howard Board of Trustees would appoint the university's first African-American president, Mordechai Johnson, who for over thirty years would prove to have a keen enough understanding of the politics of racial identity to enable Howard to become a major center for the study of African and African-

American culture.

But two years before Mordechai Johnson's appointment, both Locke and Gregory were fired by Howard's last white president, J. Stanley Durkee. The administration explained to the student newspaper that they were let go because departments were being reorganized. The fact is that these were turbulent years on many HBCU campuses, including Howard, where the Durkee administration tried fairly consistently to block or to diminish efforts to introduce the study of black life and history into the Howard curriculum (Wolters). Gregory and Locke were involved with those efforts; Locke, especially, a valuable scholar and anthologist, was a faculty leader in contesting the administration's positions and tactics.

Nevertheless, although both men were gone a year before Durkee's own resignation, the drama programs they created had been among the most sustainable efforts to reorient university culture. Why did drama not receive the same resistance, for instance, as new courses in African history? Again, further research is required. But possibly it was because theater remained a fringe discipline, indeed, an elective of the English department, while history carried weight as a sanctified academic discipline. Possibly the Howard Players garnered official support because Gregory's publicity efforts had been remarkably successful, gaining not only money but the public imprimatur of white figures like Eugene O'Neill and Kenneth McGowan.

In any case, publicity for and interest in the Howard Players weakened significantly after Gregory left Howard to become superintendent of colored schools in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Soon after Mordechai Johnson became president, Locke would return to Howard, and in 1929, would write a letter trying to persuade Gregory to return also. "How do you stand on the proposition?" Locke asked. "I have either a dream or a mirage of our Negro Theater rising again from its ashes" (Locke letters). But Gregory remained in Atlantic City with a better salary for his family and far away, he wrote to Locke, from the "mess" (Locke letters).

The independence and integrity of Howard's drama activities may, in fact, have been compromised as early as 1921 when the university had folded into its English department the previously independent Department of Dramatic Art. But apart from that, and apart from the loss of Gregory's energy and his ability to find money to keep it going, Alain Locke's phoenix must have been weighted down by it own rhetoric: that is, the rhetoric of community which was the democratic religion in an age of increasing awareness of cultural difference.

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge that my current speculation on the past, my critique, is given from my own place in history, that is to say an era when schemes for totalizing knowledge or experience have come under suspicion. But this is not to say that such suspicion did not also inhabit the

discourses of the 1920s; for if we are to generalize at all about culture in this period (or in any period), we can always get away with saying that everyone did not hold the same worldview.

What is striking to me about the rhetoric of the Howard University drama experiment is its assumption to represent the African-American experience to the African-American community through writing and performance. But as Nellie McKay, James V. Hatch, and others have shown, the 1920s was a period of multiple African-American theaters. Or as others have argued, the 1920s was a period of multiple African-American communities, existing within a complex and mixed experience of African-American and American identity.

In 1931, the historian Carter Woodson, who in 1917 had initiated Howard's first courses in African-American history, wrote a column in New York Age about the difficulties of delimiting a "Negro community." The terms for delimitation were problematic, Woodson said, because they had been articulated historically by outsiders and because African Americans were, in Woodson's words, "influenced socially and economically in various directions" (NY Age). Woodson was reacting to the same gestures of white racism that had inspired a whole theater movement, that identification of the other, the minority, as un-delimited, as univocal. But he was also trying to persuade his African-American readers to take note of the social complexity of their varied experience.

Indeed, Howard's own community, to generalize in one way, was largely a northern construct, decidedly middle-class, well-educated, and can be said to have represented the complex and mixed experience of African America no more than Alain Locke's construct of a Harlem renaissance represented all geographies and iconologies of African-American culture.

Another area I haven't explored is how the idea of community may have retained, by the 1920s, certain meanings for African Americans that it was losing for other Americans whose inclusion in the general society was less in doubt (Stack). The importance of an African-American community theater ought to be more fully examined in the context of a range of feelings for community among African Americans.

To conclude, then, the Howard Players were locally controversial because of differing values protected by a university administration. Broadly speaking, their project was radical because they tried to reconfigure assumptions of a national culture and community which through history had included the African-American only as a shadow self. But they were also locally controversial because their aspirations to produce a representative discourse met competing aspirations to define a national negro theater and its audience--its community. Finally, then, we may read Thelma Duncan's folk-play The Death Dance, about a community's powers to compel consensus and homogeneity, as an inadvertent commentary on the Howard drama program's

earliest rhetoric for encompassing and thereby defining a "National Negro Theater" and its audience.

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